

Lynette Kimble

Co-founder of the League of Women Voters of Maplewood

Interviewed by Florence Sprague

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After spending a delightful, relaxed hour and a half in conversation with Lynette Kimble of Maplewood, I found myself pondering a chicken and egg question. Does the League of Women Voters attract women of great heart and open mind or does it develop them? Perhaps it is some of both. Lynette is warm, gentle, open and friendly, but it sounds like she has always been an independent thinker, too. She is a woman who cares deeply about her community and defines community inclusively. Though she rarely makes it to an LWV meeting these days, she maintains her membership because it is an organization she believes in and whose work, especially voter service and voter registration, she values.

Lynette and her family moved to Maplewood in the 1950s. Her husband, Don, was a scientist for 3M, which was then developing its Maplewood campus. Lynette and her friend, Juel Bongard, were interested in local politics in the recently incorporated city of Maplewood. [Maplewood incorporated in 1957.] They went to a meeting of the League of Women Voters in St. Paul but were disappointed because it was only concerned with what was happening in St. Paul, so they decided to start a branch of the League in Maplewood. Little did they know what they were taking on. They couldn't just start holding meetings, they were required to research the community, recruit a minimum number of prospective members, talk to the mayor and city council and jump through a variety of procedural hoops before the new local League could be officially open for business. They began their work in early summer of 1958 when Lynette was pregnant with her fourth child. The first meeting of the newly minted LWV Maplewood was held on March 16, 1959, but Lynette wasn't there. Her daughter was born on March 15.

When talking with the mayor of Maplewood during that process she felt that he was not a nice man and he said something to the effect that "Now those darn women are going to get their noses in our business." And I guess they did. The LWV was involved in getting Plan B government adopted in Maplewood, holding public meetings on the topic so that people could ask questions and learn about it, and even though some of the councilmen at the time seemed not to favor it, the voters approved it.

Before joining the LWV by jumping in with two feet as co-founder of the Maplewood LWV Lynette knew that it would be interesting and she was really concerned about her local government. She knew, and valued, that LWV was non-partisan and that made her comfortable. But she soon learned that belonging to the LWV wasn't going to get the roads fixed.

Lynette ran for city council and school board. Though she was never elected she hopes that her campaigns helped to pave the way for other women. At the time her mother asked "Why do you want to get involved in politics? It's so dirty." She explained that politics did not have to be dirty. Years later when her son ran for city council in Stillwater she asked him that question. At first he got defensive and

tried to explain, then he stopped, looked closely at her and said “You’re joking, right?” and she was. He served as a councilman and mayor. Since then it seems to her that even non-partisan local elections have become dirtier and the way elected officials are treated by the press and public is often less than respectful.

Voter service was always a high priority to Lynette, and kept cropping up in our conversation. Having been on both sides of the equation she feels that moderating a forum was easier than being a candidate at one.

When the Maplewood LWV was founded most of the women were stay at home mothers and Lynette enjoyed working with intelligent women of all ages. She expresses great admiration for today’s young women who hold down jobs, raise children and are still active in their communities, describing them as fabulous, but really she wasn’t that different from them, as she returned to work in the field of nursing when her youngest was just 14. Over the years she has held a variety of nursing jobs and did not retire fully until age 77.

Lynette sees the world as simultaneously so big and so small. Her church is ¾ Hmong, with bilingual summer services (and separate English and Hmong services in the winter) and other members from Liberia, Puerto Rico and Russia as well as the Anglos. She is very pleased that our LWV continues to be involved in helping new citizens register to vote, seeing that as a facet of the core mission of LWV. United Nations Day was important when the UN was younger and Lynette recalls an event years ago to recognize United Nations Day which the Maplewood LWV sponsored and that she helped to plan. Held at a local elementary school, attendees all brought foods from different countries. It was her first exposure to quiche Lorraine. It was also when her husband’s boss remarked to her husband after attending the event “You’ve got a jewel there.” It turned out that his wife was the parliamentarian for the St. Paul LWV.

She recalls how hard she had to lobby the members to pass the local budget and how hard it was to convince them that so much of the money had to go the state and US divisions of LWV. Not much has changed on that last point, the majority of our dues still are passed through, but she firmly believes that all levels of LWV do important work. Personally, it was her interest in local government that first brought her to LWV, but she later became more interested in other levels of government.

During one memorable conversation with the city attorney Lynette remarked that it was so important to get everyone out to vote. He replied that it was important for “the right people to get out and vote.” Lynette thinks that LWV observers at city meetings are influential and recalls how hard it could be to keep her mouth shut when she was wearing her League button. Officials need to know that the citizens are paying attention.

Through LWV she would go to Archbishop Murray High School and teach the girls about elections, encouraging them to be active in their communities. One time when she was there, Hubert H. Humphrey stopped by. She was touched that he greeted her warmly and remembered her name, even though he had probably met her only once before. She also recalls how upset her very Republican father was when he learned that she had voted for Fritz Mondale for Attorney General, but “he got over

it and was probably secretly proud of me for thinking for myself.” When women got the vote, some men got two votes, as their wives voted as their husbands directed. She felt that was how her parents’ marriage worked, but it wasn’t for her. She always went by Mrs. Lynette Kimble, not Mrs. Don Kimble, and Don was ok with that. She may have taken his last name, but she wasn’t going to give up all of her identity and she wasn’t going to be told how to vote.

Lynette was not active in the Maplewood LWV when it merged with the Roseville and Falcon Heights Leagues, probably because she was back at work and felt she didn’t have time, but she recalls a favorite quote from an LWV calendar “Action without study is abortive.” LWV processes may seem slow to some, but they provide an important foundation for all the LWV does.

Lynette is glad that she still belongs to the LWV even though the last big LWV event she was able to attend was at the Mall of America. [date?] She fondly recalls her large green and white sweatshirt that said “40 years of a Great Idea.” Here we are at 90+ years of that great idea and she is still supporting it. Today’s members may not need LWV to have a place to have an intelligent conversation about “something other than wet baby bottoms and wet basements,” but our community still needs strong women paying attention to our elections, voter education and voter registration. Thank you, Lynette for bringing the League of Women Voters to the young city of Maplewood, Minnesota.